

Bishops seek forgiveness for clergy abuse

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) Bishops and religious leaders on Tuesday (Feb. 7) held an unprecedented service of repentance in Rome, seeking atonement for lapses in church management that led to the abuse of thousands of children by predatory priests.

"We implore forgiveness for those who have abused in various ways," Canadian Cardinal Marc Ouellet, head of the Vatican's Congregation for Bishops, said during the rite at the Church of St. Ignatius.

"This evil is within us and severely tarnishes our testimony," he admitted, and said church leaders have at times "become an instrument of evil" toward those they were charged to protect.

The ceremony was organized as part of a Vatican-sponsored conference at Rome's Gregorian University to help bishops meet a May deadline to craft voluntary "guidelines" to improve the church's handling of abuse cases.

Representatives of six groups who were in various ways involved in sexual abuse -- including the head of a religious order, a teacher and a priest -- apologized to Mary Collins, an abuse victim from Ireland who served as a representative of all abuse victims.

At the end of the service, Collins asked God for the "strength" to forgive, so that the church "may be healed."

The vigil started with 15 minutes of silence as the church was shrouded in darkness, and ended with the lighting of candles held by the participants. Earlier in the day, Collins told conference participants of her personal experience of abuse.

"Those fingers that would abuse my body the night before were the next morning holding and offering me the sacred host," she said of the priest who abused her when she was 13.

She also recalled the "collapse" of her confidence in church authorities, as the archbishop she had confided her story to focused on trying to protect the "good name" of the priest, and refused to suspend him from ministry.

During the conference, Monsignor Stephen J. Rossetti, a professor at Catholic University of America and the former director of a Maryland treatment center for troubled priests, told bishops that predator priests usually lie when confronted with an accusation.

By contrast, he said, abuse victims usually tell the truth when they recount their ordeal. Rossetti also warned that abuser priests are not easily cured and need constant monitoring, and that returning them to ministry is almost impossible.

"Once a priest has sexually molested a minor," he said, "he forever loses his privilege of ministering as a priest."